

# CHAPTER 9: URBAN LIFE

## INTRODUCTION

Rome was one of the largest cities in the ancient world. Toward the end of the Republic about one million people inhabited the city. This number rose to nearly two million two centuries later. If population estimates are correct, the city of Rome at this time had roughly the same size and density as Houston, Texas, the fourth-largest city in the United States. Although the residents of Rome often complained about crowded conditions, the population density was far less than that of modern Hong Kong, Calcutta, or even New York.

## AREAS OF THE CITY

Rome is situated inland at a bend of the Tiber River, which flows into the Mediterranean Sea at Ostia, Rome's seaport. Rome's seven distinctive hills resembled ridges or volcanic fingers that stretched, like a seven-fingered hand, through the city. The names of the hills are the Capitoline, Palatine, Aventine, Esquiline, Quirinal, Caelian, and Viminal. Between the Palatine and the Capitoline was a dank and unhealthy marsh. Shortly after the founding of the city, during the Monarchy, the Romans built a drainage system called the *Cloaca Maxima* that channeled this low-lying water into the Tiber. Between the Capitoline and the Palatine the Romans developed the reclaimed land into an area that became known as the *Forum Romanum* or the Roman Forum.

The word *forum* is related the Latin word *foris*, which means "outdoors." And the *Forum* was just that: a place outdoors. Filled with temples, shrines, and public buildings, the *Forum* was the religious, political, and social center of the city. It was "downtown" Rome. The nearby area flanking the Tiber teemed with warehouses, markets, and shops. Rome was a thriving metropolis.

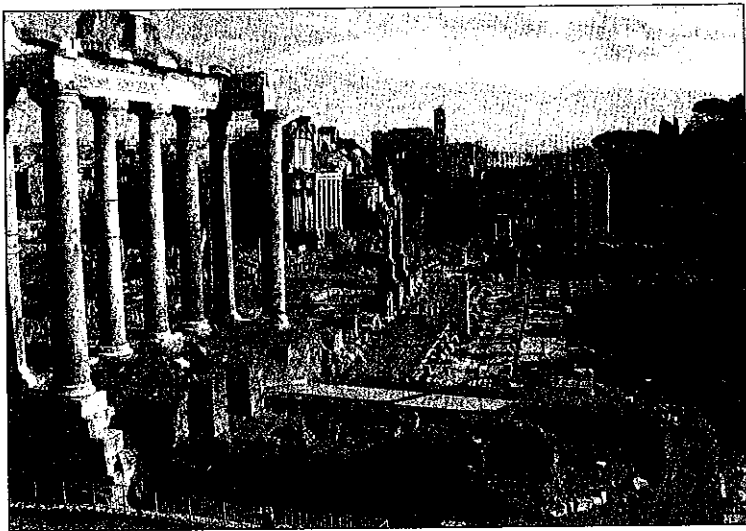


Fig. 34.  
A view of the Forum with the Temple of Saturn in the foreground, the Temple of Antoninus Pius and Faustina in the back, left and the Temple of Castor and Pollux in the back, right.

The hills, offering fresher, cooler air, attractive views, and a retreat from the noise and commotion of the city below, were the most desirable places to live. The Palatine, with its view of both the *Forum* and, later, the *Circus Maximus*, was the most fashionable hill. It became the neighborhood of choice for the rich and famous, who rivaled each other in the splendor of their homes. In fact, our word "palace" is derived from the name of the Palatine hill.

By contrast, an area known as the *Subura*, towards the foot of the Viminal, was generally an unpleasant, unsafe, overcrowded neighborhood with many dilapidated *insulae*. But the rich and the poor of Rome lived in an integrated society, especially on hills like the Esquiline and in the upper reaches of some of the valleys. Julius Caesar, for example, who came from a wealthy patrician family, was born in the *Subura*. Similarly, not all the houses on the Palatine were palatial.

Large public and private gardens and parks, both in the center and on the outskirts of the city, provided much-needed green space and sunlit areas. On a casual walk through the city an ancient pedestrian might pass through narrow and dark residential streets, noisy and busy commercial areas, dazzling and majestic public spaces, and winding paths through parks and gardens.

The average Roman walked everywhere in the city. Wealthy men and women, however, often preferred to be transported in vehicles carried on the shoulders of slaves. One type of vehicle was a *sella* or sedan chair, another was a *lectica*, an enclosed cubicle containing a couch. If a Roman did not own his own *sella* or *lectica*, he could hire one, much as people today call a cab or hire a limousine. These ancient vehicles solved a serious transportation problem for those who did not care to walk through the city. To alleviate traffic, wheeled vehicles were prohibited by law in the city during working hours, but neither a *sella* nor a *lectica* had wheels. Because of this law, all deliveries that required the use of carts and wagons took place at night. Many Romans complained about the constant noise in the city.

## ROADS AND BUILDINGS

Streets were another example of the engineering skill of the Romans. Paved with large, smooth, closely fitted black paving stones, they were slightly crowned to permit water to run off into sewer openings on the sides. At intervals, three stones were sometimes set horizontally into the pavement of the street itself.

These served two purposes: they provided a way for pedestrians to cross a muddy or flooded street comfortably and, much like our speed bumps, they slowed down traffic.

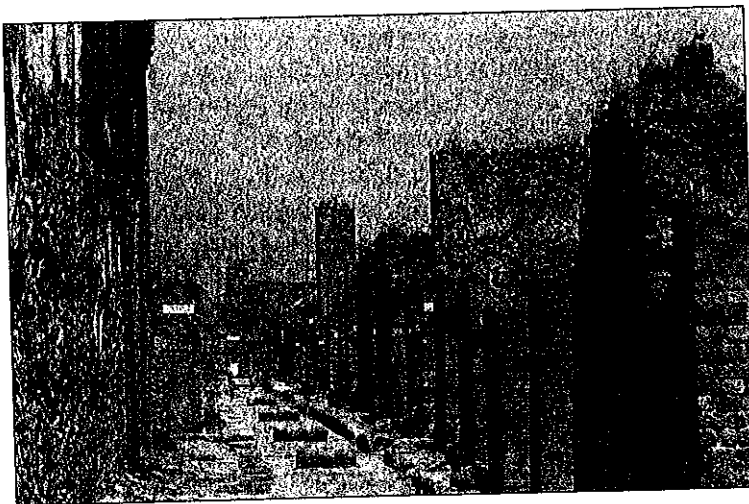


Fig. 35.  
Roman city streets, like this one in Pompeii, were frequently filled with water and debris.

There were no effective defensive gates or city walls around the entire city from shortly after 200 BCE to 271 CE. On the periphery of this sprawling city was a dense maze of narrow, winding streets lined with buildings two to eight stories high. Sometimes structures were so tall and streets were so narrow that sunlight rarely penetrated the musty gloom.

Buildings in residential areas were made of brick with a wooden roof topped with terra cotta tiles. The

façade was often covered with a layer of stucco, a plaster-like substance that was usually painted, either in a single color or with multi-colored designs. Instead of stucco, grander buildings, closer to the city's center, were often faced with a thin veneer of travertine, a local grayish white marble, or even with more exotically colored imported marble.

Owners of residential buildings, such as *insulae* (apartment houses) or *domus* (single family dwellings), leased space on the first floor, facing the street, to merchants and tradesmen of all varieties. When *tabernae* or shops were open for business, merchandise often spilled out onto the sidewalks and into the streets. The exterior walls of *tabernae* were frequently covered with graffiti. Typically, Roman graffiti consisted of notices about public games, election slogans, or simply personal remarks, good and bad, about people. Water fountains at crossroads offered to city dwellers an abundant supply of fresh, clean water from Rome's many aqueducts. Also at crossroads were neighborhood shrines dedicated to favorite gods or goddesses.

As one neared the *Forum Romanum*, large public buildings and monuments loomed into view. These included impressive temples, the Senate House or *Curia*, and *basilicae*, enormous rectangular buildings with a center aisle and smaller side aisles. *Basilicae* were utilitarian structures that served various functions. One *basilica* in the Forum, the Basilica Aemelia, was a commercial center where individual merchants sold their wares in stalls set up between the internal colonnades; another, the Basilica Julia, served as a legal center and housed law courts. Between the two *basilicae* was the *Rostra*, a large, open-air stage where noted Romans delivered public speeches and orations or where judges conducted high-profile legal trials that were sure to draw large crowds of spectators.

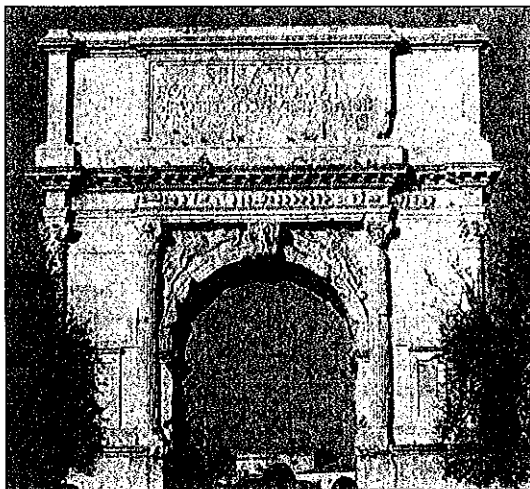


Fig. 37.  
On the Arch of Titus, one of the monuments in the Forum, are inscribed the words SENATVS POPVLVSQVE ROMANVS, often abbreviated SPQR.

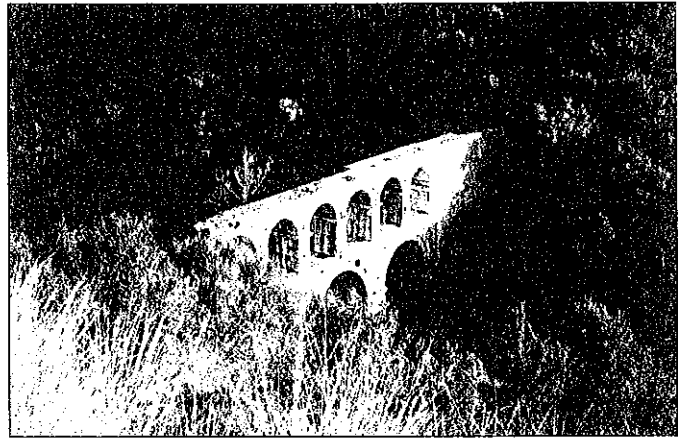


Fig. 36.  
This aqueduct in Turkey, serving the city of Priene, shows how aqueducts moved water through hills and over valleys.

A little farther beyond the *Rostra*, near the imposing Temple of Castor and Pollux, was a slave market. During the business day the Forum buzzed with activity and was crowded with Romans of all social strata as well as slaves and foreigners.

Towering above all the hustle and bustle of the Forum, on the summit of the Capitoline, were grand and stately temples and the *Tabularium*, the building where public records were kept. And not far away was the *Campus Martius*, a broad, flat area dedicated to Mars, the god of war, where generals trained their soldiers. In this region of Rome were bath complexes, theaters, stadiums, and assembly and voting areas.

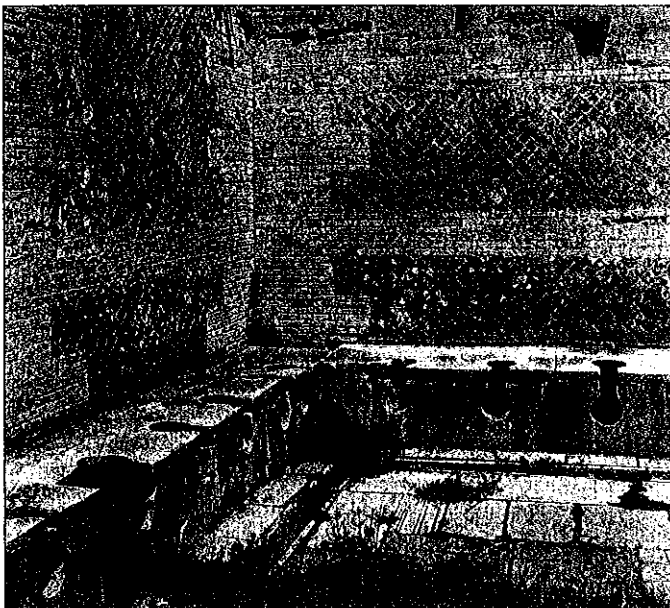
Along the left bank of the Tiber was another forum called the *Forum Boarium*, where cattle were bought and sold. Nearby were huge warehouses, granaries, and docks.

## THE PUBLIC WATER SUPPLY

Since the Tiber, a muddy and polluted river, was not a practical source of clean drinking water, the Romans built massive aqueducts (*aquaeductus*) that channeled water into Rome from clean springs and rivers in the surrounding hills and mountains. Some aqueducts supplied water from as far as 60 miles away.

Aqueducts channeled water into the city in pipes and trenches whose downward slope was carefully calculated to assist the natural force of gravity. The channels and reservoirs or settling tanks were scrupulously maintained and cleaned to prevent pollution and to inhibit the growth of harmful bacteria. An abundant supply of water gushed continually from public fountains. The overflow spilled directly into the street and then into the sewer system, providing a constant flow of water back into the Tiber.

Although some *domus* and *insulae* had pipes that connected them directly to the aqueducts and to the *Cloaca Maxima*, enabling them to have their own latrines, most city dwellers relied on public facilities or used chamber pots. Whether the contents of chamber pots were emptied into the sewer or dumped into the street, one way or another they were absorbed into the active sewers of Rome.



American Academy in Rome, Photographic Archive

Fig. 40.  
This *latrina* or public bathroom has seats placed over a water channel. Another channel in front of the bench was used for cleaning the public sponge-on-a-stick which served as toilet paper.

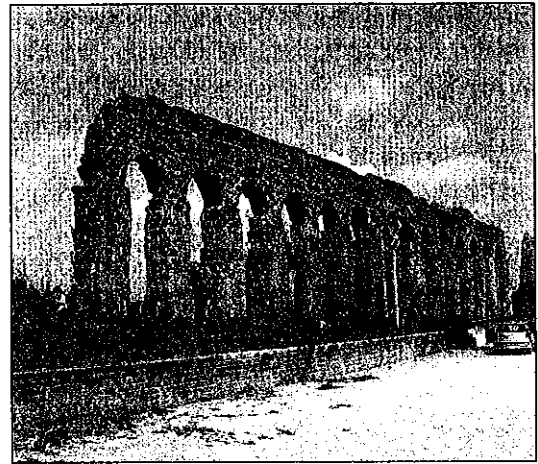


Fig. 38.  
Aqueducts like this one supplied the city with clean water for drinking and bathing.



Fig. 39.  
At the very end of the constantly flowing aqueducts were basins, the main source of water for the people of the neighborhood and for the sewer under the street.

Numerous *latrinae* or public bathrooms were conveniently located throughout the city, some of which were attractively decorated. Typically, they consisted of a bench of seats set over a channel of constantly flowing water. A smaller channel in front was used to rinse off the communal sponges-on-sticks that served as toilet paper. There were no cubicles for privacy. Each person's ample clothing fostered some degree of modesty.

Laundries needed not only water to fill their washing and rinsing tanks, but urine. Urine turns into an ammonia-like liquid that was used as a cleaning agent. To ensure that their shops had enough urine for washing clothes, fullers set out large clay pots near their doorways and encouraged male passersby to urinate into them. As unpleasant as it may seem, this practice assisted in the removal of human waste.

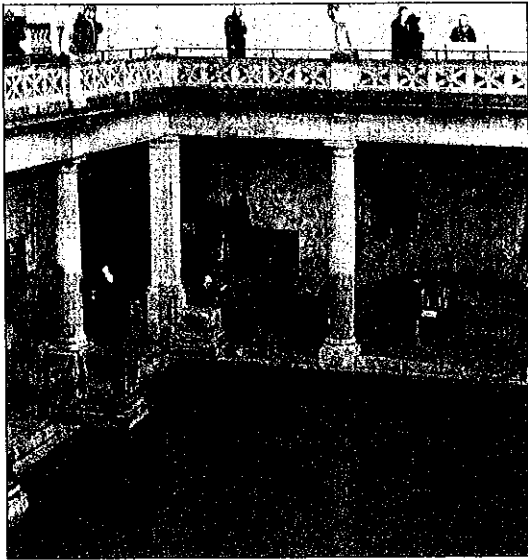


Fig. 41.  
This is the main pool of the bathing complex of the hot springs spa, *Aquae Sulis*, in Bath, England.



Fig. 42.  
Note the large wash basin in one of the bath complexes in Pompeii.

The sophisticated water system also made possible public baths, known as *balneae* or *thermae*. Roman baths, which could be large complexes or small-scale operations, were not only places to bathe, but served as social, athletic, and even intellectual and cultural centers as well. People frequented their favorite bathhouses and met their friends there, much as people today spend time in a gym or a health club. Baths generally had an exercise area called a *palaestra*. Here visitors exercised with weights, played with balls, or engaged in wrestling matches. They could also enjoy massages and have their body hair plucked. Some of the larger and better-equipped bath complexes housed libraries and displayed important works of sculpture and painting for the cultural enjoyment of their clientele.

Baths had rooms containing pools of different temperatures: the *frigidarium* or cold room, the *tepidarium* or warm room, and the *caldarium* or hot room. Water was heated by an elaborate system of furnaces below called the *hypocaustum*. Slaves stoked the wood-burning furnaces that channeled warm air under the floor and through the walls, heating both the rooms and the bathing pools in them. Thus the Romans had many opportunities to exercise and attend to their personal grooming and hygiene.

## ILLNESS AND CONTAGION

Despite good food, plenty of water, effective sewage management, and a culture that encouraged frequent bathing and regular exercise, Romans, of course, did contract illnesses. At times, uncontrollable plagues ravished the population. There were no hospitals in Rome until the fourth century. Doctors were mostly Greek slaves or freedmen who were neither highly regarded for their medical skill nor trusted. Herbal medicines and potions of all kinds were prescribed, but scientific cures were, for the most part, unknown. Sickness often resulted in death.

Romans paid scrupulous attention to the disposal of their dead. Inhumation, or burial in the ground of an intact corpse, was absolutely prohibited inside the city, thus diminishing the spread of contagion. More commonly, bodies were cremated, and this, too, took place far away from populated zones.

## PERILS OF THE CITY

Despite successful measures to make Rome a safe and pleasant place to live, urban life could be perilous. Some *insulae* were dangerously overcrowded and poorly ventilated. Sometimes buildings collapsed from shoddy construction and disrepair. Whole neighborhoods were destroyed by the frequent fires that spread through the city. Crime was another problem. Petty thievery and mob violence occurred regularly. But despite these problems, Rome was one of the best managed and culturally stimulating cities in the ancient Mediterranean world.

## Chapter 9 Exercises: *Urban Life*

### WORD SEARCH

Find the names of the seven hills of Rome.

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P | A | Q | U | I | R | I | N | A | L | S | E |
| A | D | V | U | Z | A | V | R | T | O | A | S |
| L | I | E | E | L | P | A | L | S | A | C | Q |
| A | J | Q | L | N | A | E | L | I | V | A | U |
| T | C | A | P | I | T | O | L | I | N | E | I |
| I | I | E | S | Q | O | I | R | I | N | L | L |
| N | I | N | V | I | M | I | N | A | L | I | I |
| E | C | M | E | U | P | L | I | E | A | A | N |
| S | O | S | Q | T | V | N | A | L | C | N | E |

### FILL IN THE BLANKS

Use the following word bank to fill in the blanks.

|                      |                |                   |                      |                    |
|----------------------|----------------|-------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| fountains            | <i>thermae</i> | <i>tepidarium</i> | <i>caldarium</i>     | <i>hypocaustum</i> |
| <i>latrinae</i>      | Ostia          | Palatine          | <i>Forum Romanum</i> | clean water        |
| <i>Cloaca Maxima</i> | Tiber          | Capitoline        | aqueducts            | <i>frigidarium</i> |
| <i>balneae</i>       |                |                   |                      |                    |

### Water and the City of Rome

- One of the earliest engineering feats of the Romans was the construction of the \_\_\_\_\_, the city's sewer system. By using it to drain the marsh that lay in the valley between the \_\_\_\_\_ and the \_\_\_\_\_ hills, the Romans were able to make use of the land that eventually became the \_\_\_\_\_.
- The \_\_\_\_\_ flows through the city of Rome and empties into the sea at \_\_\_\_\_, Rome's seaport. It was here that most of the city's importing and exporting of trade goods took place. Smaller vessels, however, could sail on to Rome where they loaded and unloaded their cargo at docks and warehouses on the river bank.

3. Although the river was an important commercial waterway, it was not a source of \_\_\_\_\_. To provide the city with the water it needed, the Romans constructed an elaborate system of \_\_\_\_\_, which were carefully maintained.
4. Some residences in the city had their own water supply, but most people obtained their water from public \_\_\_\_\_, commonly located at crossroads.
5. Public toilets, called \_\_\_\_\_, were conveniently located throughout the city. Waste matter was flushed away into the sewer.
6. One of the triumphs of the Romans' ability to manage water was the abundance of bathhouses and bathing complexes throughout the city. Called \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_, baths offered the opportunity for bathers to submerge themselves into a cold pool called a \_\_\_\_\_, a warm pool, called a \_\_\_\_\_, or a hot pool, called a \_\_\_\_\_. The regulation of water temperature was controlled by a slave-powered heating system called a \_\_\_\_\_.

## MATCHING COLUMNS

Match each of the buildings or places in the first column with the correct identification in the second column.

- |                                |                                       |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1. _____ <i>Tabularium</i>     | a) by definition, a place outdoors    |
| 2. _____ <i>Curia</i>          | b) speaker's platform                 |
| 3. _____ <i>Subura</i>         | c) single-family dwelling             |
| 4. _____ <i>taberna</i>        | d) cattle market                      |
| 5. _____ <i>forum</i>          | e) Senate House                       |
| 6. _____ <i>Campus Martius</i> | f) army's training ground             |
| 7. _____ <i>domus</i>          | g) crowded and densely populated area |
| 8. _____ <i>Rostra</i>         | h) a desirable place to live          |
| 9. _____ <i>Palatine</i>       | i) large, rectangular building        |
| 10. _____ <i>insula</i>        | j) shop                               |
| 11. _____ <i>Forum Boarium</i> | k) apartment house                    |
| 12. _____ <i>basilica</i>      | l) repository for public records      |
| 13. _____ <i>palaestra</i>     | m) an exercise area in a bathhouse    |